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ABSTRACT

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COUNSELING CENTER

PRE-COUNSELING HELP SOURCES: A LOOK AT WHERE CLIENTS GO BEFORE CONTACTING THE UNIVERSITY COUNSELING CENTER

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SUMMARY

Five hundred ninety-one clients from two university counseling centers indicated the help sources they had contacted before going to the counseling center. Analysis of the rank order in which help-givers were consulted yielded significant differences both within and across the counseling centers under two types of problems, emotional-social and educational-vocational. Significant differences in clients' ratings of the degree of helpfulness expected from the counseling also occurred both within and across counseling centers under both problem types.

Pre-Counseling Help Sources: A Look at Where Clients Go Before Contacting the University Counseling Center

Students and their problems are of major concern to university counseling centers. Previous research has focused on the characteristics of clients as opposed to nonclients (Armstrong, 1969; Berdie and Stein, 1966), type of problem and sex of client (Collins and Sedlacek, 1974), sex of counselor (Koile and Bird, 1956), perceived appropriateness of problem type (Resnick and Gelso, 1971; Warman, 1961), and previous counseling experience of clients (Form, 1953; King and Matteson, 1959; Wilcove and Sharp, 1971). Students' predictions of whom they would contact for help with hypothetical problems has been the focus of other studies (Christensen and Magoon, 1973; Snyder, Hill, and Derksen, 1972).

Related to studies examining probable behavior is Rotter's (1954) thesis that the probability of a particular behavior occurring is a function of its subjectively perceived potential for reinforcement in a given situation and the reinforcement value of the action. Findings of Christensen and Magoon (1974) as well as those of Snyder and associates (1972) confirmed Phares and Rotter's (1956) results in a psychological testing study which demonstrated that the ranked value of a reinforcement changes as a function of the situation. Although variables affecting the reinforcement value of potential help-givers is of general interest, the topic of help-givers in general lends itself to more exciting examination with practical and innovative implications for a counseling center. For example, do students contact others for help before coming to a counseling center, and if so, who are those groups? Previous studies approached this question from a speculative standpoint, asking students where they <u>think</u> they would go for help in general (Armstrong, 1969) or with specific hypothetical problems (Christensen and Magoon, 1974; Snyder et al., 1972). If certain groups of help-givers are likely to be sought out by students before going to a counseling center, then those groups might be helpful resources and, in the case of paraprofessionals, possible targets for training in the helping skills.

The present study attempts to provide a point of departure for the above considerations by examining whether students actually go where they speculate they will go with concerns they find difficult or impossible to solve alone. Subjects were asked where they had gone for help before coming to a university counseling center and to what extent they expected the counseling provided by the university counseling center to be helpful.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were clients who contacted the counseling center at the University of Maryland and at the University of South Carolina during a one semester period. The sample consisted of 191 clients from the University of South

Carolina (54% of whom presented emotional-social concerns and 46%, educational-vocational concerns) and 400 clients from the University of Maryland (62% of whom presented emotional-social concerns and 38%, educational-vocational concerns).

Intake Questionnaire

A modified version of the questionnaire used by Christensen and Magoon (1974) was developed to obtain general demographic data and to assess where clients had gone for help with their presenting problem before coming to the counseling center as well as their expectancy for the degree of helpfulness of counseling. From a list of 12 potential help-givers subjects were asked to indicate whom they contacted first for help with their presenting problem, whom they contacted second, and so on until they had indicated all persons contacted before coming to the counseling center. Additionally, they were asked to check one of four statements which represented a range of expectancies regarding the helpfulness of counseling (great help, some help, make problem worse, and not sure).

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to subjects at the time they visited the counseling center to request counseling and immediately prior to the intake session. The questionnaire took approximately five minutes to complete.

Rankings of the order in which subjects consulted help sources were analyzed with the Mann-Whitney U Test. Comparisons were made under two problem types, emotional-social versus educational-vocational, both within and between the two counseling centers. Subjects' predictions of the helpfulness of counseling were analyzed by chi square, again within and between counseling centers for the two types of problems.

Results

Table I presents the rank order in which help-givers were consulted by clients before they visited the counseling centers. Results of the Mann-Whitney U Test that analyzed comparisons of the two problem types both within and between counseling centers are presented in Table 2. The four comparisons were statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Results of the chi square analysis used to compare subjects' ratings of their expectancy of counseling's helpfulness are presented in Table 3. Expectancy ratings for University of Maryland clients with emotional-social

problems versus those with educational-vocational problems were significantly different at the .05 level; the three other comparisons yielded larger differences.

Sex differences were found between types of presenting problems. Approximately equal proportions of males and females presented educational-vocational concerns at each of the counseling centers: 47% by males and 53% by females at the University of South Carolina; 52% by males and 48% by females at the University of Maryland. The proportion of female clients presenting emotional-social concerns, however, was nearly double that of males at each counseling center: 64% by females and 36% by males at the University of South Carolina; 62% by females and 38% by males at the University of Maryland.

Discussion

The sex differences reported in this study are consistent with those reported in past research. For example, Koile and Bird (1956) using the Mooney Problem Checklist found that male students in their sample were less likely than females to check highly personal problems as sources of difficulty. Collins and Sedlacek (1974) examined counselor ratings of students' problems at the University of Maryland and found that female clients more frequently presented emotional-social concerns.

Large differences emerged between the two counseling centers with respect to their client population. Emotional-social clients at one center differed significantly from emotional-social clients at the other center in terms of whom they sought for help. Likewise, educational-vocational clients at one center differed significantly from clients with educational- vocational concerns at the other center. Additionally, within each center clients with emotional-social concerns differed from educational-vocational clients in terms of consulted help-givers. These latter findings confirm earlier research which suggested strong relationships between preceived appropriateness of a particular help source and specific types of problems (Berdie and Stein, 1966; Frankel and Perlam, 1959; Gonyea and Warman, 1962; Johnson, 1958).

Clients at the University of South Carolina indicated that they sought help initially from student friends for both problem types, in contrast to clients at the University of Maryland who consulted relatives first for personal-social concerns and clergy members first for educational-vocational problems. Statistical comparisons of the rank order of potential help-givers consulted prior to visiting either counseling center yielded highly significant differences. These results are inconsistent with those reported by Christensen and Magoon (1974) which indicated that subjects did not rank significantly different the help-givers whom they speculated they would contact, regardless of type of problem. The discrepant results of the two studies suggest the importance of distinguishing between hypothetical and real problems when studying clients' perceptions of help-givers.

Perhaps of greater importance, however, is the identification of groups whom clients tend to seek for help before they contact the university counseling center. The relatively high ranking of physicians, for example, lends credibility to the efforts of many counseling centers and campus student health services to develop positive interagency alliances. The high ranking of parents as a pre-counseling source of help confirms the need for counseling centers to make themselves and their services known both on and outside the campus. Summer orientation programs for students and parents provide excellent opportunities for counselors to alert parents to typical concerns of college students, to provide suggestions (perhaps through role playing) for optimizing their helpfulness, and to familiarize them with the services and staff of the counseling center. Physicians and parents represent only two possible groups with whom counselors could work to maximize pre-counseling helpfulness with college students' emotional and educational-vocational concerns.

Analysis of clients' expectations regarding the helpfulness of counseling indicated significant differences under both types of problems, emotional-social and educational-vocational, both within and between the two counseling centers. Although these findings do not lend themselves to clear and definite inference, one implication may be that if a counseling center's image is associated largely with one problem type those students with concerns not related to the center's image of service may be doubtful of the helpfulness the center can provide, thus creating an atmosphere that could subtlely undermine cooperation with the counselor.

In summary, findings of this study indicate that clients within and across counseling centers differentially contact potential help-givers before going to a university counseling center. Identification of these pre-counseling help sources provides a direction for counseling centers' outreach activities, and optimally could result in more effective interventions with paraprofessional and other campus groups. The fact that highly significant differences occurred by analyzing the rank order in which help-givers were consulted by clients before visiting either counseling center, a finding discrepant with previous research employing nonclients and hypothetical situations, challenges the generalizability of results based on hypothetical problems to client populations. Finally, client differences in the rank order of help-givers contacted prior to counseling, and client differences in the expectation of counseling helpfulness, reinforce the importance of caution when generalizing across counseling center populations.

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Footnotes

The first author currently is at George Washington University. Reprints are available upon request to Janice M. Birk, Shoemaker Building, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742.

Table 1

Rank Order of Help-Sources Consulted for Two Types of Problems

University of South Carolina			University of Maryland		
Help source for emotional-social problems	Ranking	Help source for educational-vocational problems	Help source for emotional-social problems	Ranking	Help source for educational-vocational problems
Student Friend	1	Student Friend	Relative (not parent)	1	Clergy
Parent	2	Faculty Member	Student Friend	2	Physician
Nonstudent Friend	3	Parents	Parent	3	Parents
Physician	4	Relative (not parent)	Friend (older)	4	Male Counselor at University
Friend (older)	5	Friend (older)	Physician	5	Student Friend
Clergy	6	Clergy and Physician (tie)	Male Counselor at University	6	Female Counselor at University
Faculty Advisor	7	Clergy and Physician (tie)	Nonstudent Friend	7	Friend (older)
Relative (not parent)	8	Nonstudent Friend	Psychiatrist	8	Psychiatrist
Psychiatrist	9	Female Counselor at University	Faculty Member	9	Relative (not parent)
Faculty Member	10	Faculty Advisor	Clergy	10	Faculty Advisor
Male Counselor at University	11	Male Counselor at University	Faculty Advisor	11	Faculty Member
Female Counselor at University	12	Psychiatrist	Female Counselor at University	12	Nonstudent Friend

Table 2

U-Values and Significance Level of Differences between Subgroups for Rank Order of Help-Givers

Group	U-Value
University of Maryland (emotional-social vs educational-vocational)	26.99***
University of South Carolina (emotional-social vs educational-vocational)	21.74***
Educational-Vocational (University of Maryland vs University of South Carolina)	20.11***
Emotional-Social (University of Maryland vs University of South Carolina)	20.76***

***$p < .001$

Table 3

Chi-Square Values and Significance Level of Differences between Subgroups for Expectancy of Helpfulness

Group	Chi-Square
University of Maryland (emotional-social vs educational-vocational)	7.04*
University of South Carolina (emotional-social vs educational-vocational)	18.33***
Educational-Vocational (University of Maryland vs University of South Carolina)	29.02***
Emotional-Social (University of Maryland vs University of South Carolina)	12.33**

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$